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Two Notes on the Crowing Crested Cobra

By DR. J. O. SHIRCORE, C.M.G.

Africa still has its mysteries of which the so-called crowing cobra is not the least. Writing from Karonga in Nyasaland, Dr. Shircore has sent the Society the following two notes in the last few months. It would be interesting to know if his views can be corroborated from experience in other parts of Africa.

1

THE first account of the Crowing Crested Cobra is a graphic description, of its appearance and propensities, in the Journals of Livingstone's Last Travels, Vol. II, pages 243-244; and, so far as it goes, similar information might be obtained, from many of the African tribes of Central and Eastern Africa, to the present day. Bishop Chauncey Maples, whilst travelling near the River Rovuma, or Lujenda, in the early eighties of the last century, is said to have heard the crow—unfortunately, the reference has escaped me.

Probably, most inquirers have now relegated this creature to the same category as the basilisk, or cockatrice: but there is in my possession what is, in my belief, the bony skeleton of the fleshy comb, and a portion of the neck, in which are still embedded several segments of the vertebrae, reputed to come from the same source; and while confirmation must await examination by the expert zoologist, I am constrained to commit to paper data collected, during the past thirty-five years, and, in so doing—to avoid the repetition of hearsay—to treat the subject as though the entity of the snake were no longer in doubt.

It is called *Songo* in Chi-yao (which means literally something which strikes downwards and pricks the head); *Inkhomi* (the killer) in Chi-nkhonde and Chi-ngoni; *Ngoshe* in Chi-wemba; *Kovoko* in Ki-nyamwezi; *Hongo* in Chi-ngindo; and, according to Livingstone, *Bubu* at Shupanga on the Lower Zambesi.

It is a powerful, crested, buff-coloured and vicious snake, which crows. There is no hood and it is, therefore, not a cobra. Full-grown specimens are 18 to 20 feet in length—larger than the hamadryad. It moves with great rapidity, and it is tree-loving like the mamba, which it resembles in several respects.

The male crows like a cock, and can be heard at a distance of several hundred yards: the female utters a clucking sound (Te Te Te Te) and both have a warning note (Chu Chu Chu Chu) which is repeated in quick succession.

The crest is red, and present in both sexes, but points forwards and not backwards, as in the guineafowl. The male has wattles as well. This crest has a distinctive name amongst certain tribes.

Its skeleton consists of a thin lanceolate plate of bone (1⅓ ins. long by ½ in. wide, at its broadest part) with a markedly rounded smooth ridge, ⅛ in. wide, slightly overhanging both sides of the upper border, with a distinct

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voluted curve to the left. The lower border is sharp-edged and faintly ridged. The lateral surfaces are concave, throughout the long diameter. The whole fragment is eminently constructed for the insertion and attachment of muscles—much the same as the structure of the breast-bone of a bird. Some skin, part of which, spread smoothly above the base of the plate, on one side, is red in colour: and attached to the lower angle is a dark wrinkled bit, which appears to be a remnant of the head-skin—all which should be valuable for purposes of identification. A small portion of the bone, tapering towards both ends, $\frac{1}{2}$ in. long by $\frac{1}{8}$ in. wide, is missing from the lower anterior border, including the tip—it was broken off for use as medicine by the witch-doctor, from whom the specimens were obtained.

The home of this crowing snake embraces some 800,000 sq. miles, extending from the latitude of the Lower Zambesi to that of Victoria Nyanza in the north, Lake Tanganyika and Northern Rhodesia in the west, and the Indian Ocean. Within these limits it is confined to areas which provide the oecological factors suitable to its mode of life. Periodically, it selects a haunt near a road, or path, which traverses some forested area, and, hidden in the dense foliage of certain types of trees, coils its tail around an overhanging branch. From this it strikes at the head of any man, or animal passing below. When this happens travellers are warned off the road, or, if they must go through, observe the greatest caution. The old African custom was to carry a pot of hot porridge or water on the head, so that the snake in striking might be burnt and desist from attack, or kill itself.

Doubtless at times small mammals and birds are devoured, but it is remarkable that it subsists mostly on maggots breeding in human excreta, and the bodies of animals it has killed. For example it kills guineafowls, possibly for this purpose, which are retrieved by Africans whenever opportunity offers; and bones are often found near its first haunt.*

For the reason that maggots are found naturally near villages, some *Inkhomi* live in their vicinity, where, as in the example of the village-dwelling Indian cobra, a mutual forbearance is observed between snake and man. The snake in fact sounds its warning note to scare off intruders, on too close an approach, as does the rattlesnake.

On the other hand, the forest-dwelling *Inkhomi* is constantly vicious and attacks on sight, or even on hearing the human voice. So well is this known, and so great the dread of this snake, that African Telegraph Linesmen, whose duties may bring them into the danger zone, take every precaution to enter, and despatch their work, silently, and get away as quickly as possible.

The habit of taking up a beat along a frequented path is, probably, governed by the seasonal variation in the distribution of game. Game scarcity compels the snake to transfer its attention to man, in an attempt to secure its peculiar food.

The urge to kill—and from all accounts the attack is delivered swiftly, and with the utmost determination—would not appear to be wanton.

*The killing of animals in order to secure maggots for food is not confined to the *Inkhomi*. The trait is exhibited also by the bush coucal, of the genus *Centropus*, which blinds cane-rats, and small snakes, by pecking out their eyes, when, being unable to sustain themselves, they die of starvation, and, in due course, provide maggots for food.

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The *Inkhomi* is associated, intimately, with the cult of serpent-worship, and certain aspects of African medicine and witchcraft. The adepts of the serpent-worship cult are also seers. By use of medicine they acquire second-sight during sleep, and are thus able to locate the snake. The next day medicine is placed at the entrance of the hole in the occupied tree, or rock, whereupon the snake emerges writhing, as if drugged. It is then taken up, hung over the neck, and coiled round the body of the adept, who—the leader of the dance—accompanied by dancers, sings, claps, and dances until close on dawn: the snake then dies, or is killed.

The head-skin is used by the leader as a head-dress, with the rest of the skin wrapped round his body, during this snake-dance, which is held during the last quarter of the moon.

When an *Inkhomi* happens to be killed, in the ordinary way it is divided up into small pieces, which are distributed amongst all present; but the chief of the district, and witchdoctors, have prescriptive rights. For the *Inkhomi* is enlisted, in common with the lion and crocodile, to kill an enemy, or act as a protective genius. And African medicine, protective and curative, against any other snake is ineffective against an attack, or bite, from an *Inkhomi*, unless a portion of its body is incorporated.

In conclusion, although the above comprises a fair record, it would not be possible to acquire deeper knowledge of the practice and mysteries of the cults involved, without serving an apprenticeship, when, of course, nothing material would be revealed, without an oath of secrecy.

2

Since my previous note, on the Crowing Crested Cobra, specimens have been obtained from two other examples.

One lot, from the smaller snake, consists of five lumbar vertebrae, which are 7 mm. long by 5 mm. wide, with the concave facet, for articulation with the body of the adjacent bone, 2 mm. by 3 mm. in diameter, from above downwards, and side to side, respectively: a piece of skin 10 mm. by 8 mm.: two ribs 26 mm. in length on the curve: the skin-tip of the crest, 6 mm. long by 3 mm. wide at the base, flattened from side to side, and having a granular surface.

The other snake, which is reputed to have killed a man, must have been gigantic. It provides a single dorsal vertebra, from which however almost all the processes, and part of the body—originally 22 mm. long by 16 mm. wide—were removed for compounding medicines and talismans. The fragment is a massive piece of bone, and fortunately, the cup-like articulating surface, of which the diameters are 8 mm. by 9 mm., and the depth 4 mm., is intact.

The fact that so many fragments, now from no less than three different *Inkhomi*, have been preserved, is significant; for the African buries all other snakes that have been killed, especially the puff-adder, mamba, and python, since many of the bones are sharp, and infective, and produce an intractable

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septic wound, or worse, when left lying about and trodden on by the bare foot.

The *Inkhomi's* head is said to be small for the size of its body, and the bones of the skull more solid than that of other snakes. Judging from the density of this vertebra this is probable.

The utility of the *Inkhomi*, in medicine and witchcraft, is to intensify, or reinforce, the specific virtues of the other ingredients used, namely, the action is synergistic—analogous, somewhat, to that of musk, or civet, in perfumery.

While the evidence collected, so far, is, without exception, confirmative of the specificity of the snake, in order to put the matter beyond question, I am not without hope of obtaining irrefutable proof, in the form of the whole head-skin, if not the complete head. There are, of course, several militating factors in the way.

Recent Books

The Akan Doctrine of God, a Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion. J. B. Danquah, Ph. D., L.L.B. With 9 illustrations by Kofi Antubam of Achimota. Lutterworth Press. Pp. 206. 14*s*.

A talented young anthropologist (lost in the war) criticised one of my books on the ground that not the Supreme Being but the ancestral spirits hold the primary place in African religious thought and practice. Dr. J. B. Danquah expresses the same opinion; but yet, rightly I think, devotes the bulk of his interesting and important book to an exposition of the Akan doctrine of God. Akan religious thought knows only one God, he declares, and everything else found in the land, in the form of religion, is nothing else but superstition (p. 39). The "everything else" apparently includes the cult of the *abosom*, the lesser gods such as Tano of which we read in Rattray's books and about which Dr. Danquah has nothing much to say. But he does not include the Asamanfo (the ancestors) among the superstitions. Indeed one of the merits of the book is that he makes clearer for us the relation between the Supreme Being and the ancestors. We have commonly regarded these as intermediaries between man and God. Dr. Danquah confirms this impression; but there is much more in it than that. Man and God are ontologically continuous. The relation between them is not that of the moon to the tides, where you have an irresistible force acting from outside. Nor is the God of the Akan the Sultan of Muslim theology, external to his own creation. He is immanent within humanity. He is Father-Ancestor-Creator; as a human father is continuous in his son so is God "continuous with the past, present and future of his relations of blood" (p. 24). He is invoked as Nana ('grandfather'), not metaphorically but actually the primordial ancestor; he lives in the social group; in him "the family completes its genealogy" (p. 168). "As such ancestor he deserves to be worshipped and is worshipped in the visible ancestral head, the good chief of the community. All ancestors who are honoured as such are in the line of the great Ancestor." Each of these "is called Nana as even God, the first ancestor, is called Nana" (pp. 27, 28). This is the theoretical basis of the position in Akan society of the *opanyin*, the elected head of family, tribe, clan or State. When he is selected as the fittest to rule and lead his community he is worshipped with acts of adoration and reverence as some one like a god, or one who is about to become a god. By being anointed and by ruling well the *opanyin* becomes a Nana (p. 121). He is the revelation of God in man; the exemplar and paradigm of Nyankopon (the supreme Being), "what God in himself is, or ought to be". If he dies in harness, without loss of dignity or taint of disgrace, he is deifiable (p. 122). He is a link between man and God, but only because in him the blood of the first Ancestor still flows as it flows in all men. "In a word, Akan religion, in its highest expression, is the worship of the race" (p. 169).

In this brief review we have touched only one topic of this intriguing treatise. It

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